

' **Monster** ' successfully carries audience into the torment of life in the gutter

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If **the** American Dream can be likened to a glistening stone found **in** a forest on a warm, summer day by innocent, beautiful children, "**Monster**" is **the** ugly swarm they see under **the** stone, writhing chaotically **in the** mud.

This film assaults you up close and very personal, as if you're part **of** a problem for which there's no solution. Even under its emotional barrage, you can't look away, for writer-director Patty Jenkins pulls you **in** so completely to **the** plight **of** her characters that turning away would seem like willful neglect. And besides, Charlize Theron won't let you off so easily. She holds onto you, not through **the** dazzle **of** her familiar beauty and charm (as **in** "Sweet November," "**The Devil's Advocate**," several others), but with fierce anger and frantic scorn.

By now, **the** film's publicists have alerted filmgoers everywhere to Theron's self-prescribed makeover from svelte beauty to overweight, puffy-faced veteran **of the** streets and highways. She becomes a prostitute named Aileen Wuornos, an executed murderer whose own words supply much **of** Jenkins' script.

Once a starry-eyed girl who dreamed **of** Hollywood, Wuornos started out as a hooker **in** her early teens. At first, she wouldn't differentiate between selling sex and holding down a conventionally acceptable job. As she got older, her rationalizations, as well as her misty aspirations, vanished. She began to think **of** her foul role **in the** world, itself a foul place. One terrifying night, as she was brutally raped, she freed herself and shot her attacker.

Since this violent retaliation coincided with **the** earliest stages **of** Wuornos' loving relationship with a young lesbian named Selby (Christina Ricci), Wuornos for a time backed away from her trade. But she quickly found there were no jobs for someone who hadn't done anything else. Over **the** next year and more (1989-90), she got money and a kind **of** class-action revenge from several wretched victims before being apprehended.

Theron's performance is at times electrifying but includes segments **in** which she appears to be working at **the** role, knowing she's got to deliver brute strength **in** contrast to her delicate, girlish lover.

"**Monster**" is a harsh form **of** entertainment, which makes **the** viewer share **in the torment of** its film subject. But only **in** that **torment** lies **the** honest value **of** this story. Pollyannas beware.

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